

Pigeonhole Podcast Episode 56

[low, eerie music on piano with industrial percussion creeps up and feels like it just won't go away]

Introduction

CHORUS OF VOICES: Pigeonholed, pigeonhole, pigeonhole, pigeonhole, pigeonhole, pigeonhole, pigeonhole, pigeonhole.

ARIEL: A bad babysitter brings over a bag of weed, her boyfriend, and a VHS of *A Nightmare on Elm Street*.

CHERYL NARRATING: That's Ariel Baska, and at the time of the VHS movie night, they were three years old. And yes, they watched *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, and now...

ARIEL: I am a horror activist and a DeafBlind queerdo.

CHERYL NARRATING: Three-year-old Ariel fell in love with horror films that night for very personal reasons at the time, but the love endures.

ARIEL: We are living in some phenomenally horrific times right now. Fictional horror is the easiest way for me to psychologically deal with the reality that is so horrific.

CHERYL NARRATING: They're not just a horror film fan, they're a filmmaker and the curator of a horror-related film festival, and they even have recommendations on what you can watch if that also helps you deal with the horror of reality. [shudders]

Horror is decidedly not my comfort zone. I didn't have a joyous experience watching *The Exorcist* with my babysitter when I was little or coming across the elevator in *The Shining* trailer when I was about six. I'm so nervous with the topic that I even manage to avoid writing any questions before my conversation with Ariel and have to improvise, which, for me, is its own kind of horror show. [eerie music fades out]

Scary versus horror

CHERYL: I have a very serious and scary question for you. Uh, the scary preamble is that I didn't plan anything. And the scary question is, what does scary mean?

ARIEL: For me, scary means something unexpected, something unknown, something hidden. It doesn't even necessarily have to be something traditionally scary. It's just the idea of the unknown or the unexpected or the incongruous. The thing that you aren't expecting.

CHERYL: When I was in grad school for theater, I did a paper on, like, the history of comic theory, and it's like exactly what you just said about scary.

ARIEL: This is my theory that comedy and horror are very closely aligned in a lot of ways because they're the two genres that produce an audible sound. Like, that inhalation of breath that you take when you're laughing is, to me, the same thing as that inhalation of breath that you take when you're gasping. To me, the two are so inextricably intertwined. The incongruous, the unexpected, is both the setup for a joke as well as the setup for real fear.

CHERYL: I've never thought about the two as being similar. So...I'm confu-, uh, I'm not confused. I'm taken aback. Because how can I, what do I do with this information? Why do we have such different response...no. What do I wanna ask? I'm freaking out with this new information, Ariel. [laughs] All of this will be edited out.

ARIEL: Don't edit it out! I think the wonderment and the bafflement is an inherent product of what we do in horror. Because honestly, like if we're not, at some level, baffled by what we're doing on some level, we're not doing it right.

CHERYL: In horror or in any art?

ARIEL: Literally any art, but especially in horror, shall we say.

CHERYL: Now, is horror the same as scary?

ARIEL: No. Like, scary is that inhalation of breath that you take that, you know, makes you gasp. It's the... it's the thing that makes you realize that you are alive, that you have a body, that you are embodied, when you're forced to take that breath.

But horror, to me, has an opera to it. There's another layer of text on top of it that makes it... to a lot of people, you know, something like the expressionistic artwork of something like Cabinet of Dr. Caligari, for a lot of people, sort of is the embodiment of horror because it takes something that is relatable and realistic and creates something shadowy and menacing and pushes you outside of the boundaries of what is real. And to me, horror is always pushing the boundaries of what is real and what is not. Whereas scary can literally be like, I forgot where my keys were and then suddenly, they were in the fridge or something.

CHERYL: [gasps] Oh! [laughs] I wasn't expecting that example. I was suspecting, "I didn't know where my keys are, and then I saw a monster holding them." [chuckles]

ARIEL: No, no. But because honestly, like, scary can be things in and of ourselves, things that we do that shock us and surprise us. It's not always about the monster in the corner. The monster in the corner pushes the bounds of reality, and so that's more horror than scary.

CHERYL: Okay. I get it now. Right. Right. What is scary to you besides losing your keys and finding them in the fridge? 'Cause I get why that would be scary.

ARIEL: It's funny because you're catching me in the week where I'm supposed to be consulting on jump scares for the Academy Museum. And I hate jump scares, FYI. Like,

they are my least favorite part of the horror genre. I'm being asked to define how to create those things for the museum, but at the same time, I'm realizing that what actually scares me tends to be something growing: a growing suspense, a growing anxiety, a growing concern, and not necessarily something that jumps out at you. If it's sudden, it can resolve quickly. If it's hidden and growing, it can...it can go somewhere and do something far darker and far more insidious in some way.

CHERYL: I tell people I hate horror films, but it's really only jump scares [laughs] that I hate.

ARIEL: We're on the same page with that. So, you are completely absolved from any guilt in saying you hate horror.

CHERYL: Hey. Oh, thank you. Phew. 'Cause I am talking to a horror expert and horror filmmaker.

I can't do jump scares because since my brain injury, I have this pathological startle response. I jump up, my arms flail. Sometimes I start laughing or crying. It's very tiring and it's very upsetting to be so overstimulated. I'm curious why jump scares are not in your Top 10.

ARIEL: In the disability community, I think dysautonomia is a really common issue for a lot of us that I think really affects how we can enjoy the things that we enjoy. For me, it really is an accessibility issue when you get right down to it. Jump scares, for me, are one of those things that to me is kind of a cheap trick to, you know, trick the nervous system into thinking things that are not so. And rather than actually building something that has meaning, you're just kind of pushing that quick and easy response. And it's the same thing with strobing. I have horrible reactions to strobing as well. And I feel like, again, that's tricking your body into a specific response rather than taking the time to build something visually interesting. Those of us who live with a certain level of anxiety at all times, like, we don't need that in order to feel terrified.

CHERYL: [giggles]

ARIEL: We don't need our bodies to rebel against us in order to feel some sense of, like, true horror and true fright.

Ariel's filmmaking

[spooky, eerie droning music break]

CHERYL: So, this must explain why your first film called *Our First Priority* was really that slow burn, wasn't it? That slow psychological burn.

ARIEL: The most key thing was the undercurrent of tension between the doctor and the patient. This film was specifically me sending a doctor to hell for telling a patient it was all in her head. That is essentially what I wanted to do with this film because I needed some cathartic sense of release for the fact that I've had doctors all my life, from the

time that I was very young, telling me I must be imagining all the things that were wrong with me. Never mind the fact that I have multiple rare diseases and a medical case file, you know, taller than I am. It's still a reality in our world that doctors have a lot of medical bias. And you know, it only gets worse as all of our systems of care are constantly collapsing and/or shrinking and/or both.

I'm really not saying doctors are terrible people. In fact, like, you know, many of my doctors have seen *Our First Priority* and directly reckoned with the fact that I quoted them in *Our First Priority*. I really sincerely believe that a lot of doctors can be confronted with this patient side of reality and learn to approach the patient with a slightly different lens. I think that's a reality for every doctor. Whether or not they've had that opportunity or not is another question.

CHERYL: Mm-hmm. Have you made other horror content that's not about medical care? [laughs]

ARIEL: I actually wrote a horror film right after *Our First Priority* was finished called *Shining In the Dark*, specifically about a blind projectionist and her experience of seeing the world and also experiencing visions of her dead daughter. That was meant to be a version of kind of talking about how I see the world because I experience the world as a low-vision person. I have one functional eye. My quote-unquote "blind" eye is something that I have a hard time articulating in language exactly what I see. I created a lookbook, and I created a lot of different kinds of visual cues to help explain what I see out of that eye. Between talking about what my vision is and what the hallucinations are for this character, I felt like I could create the world that I see in my head.

I did a lot of the previsualization for the project, but I never actually got to shoot it, which made me very sad. I haven't completely given up on the project. It's just that it's something that is very much on the back burner now. *Shining In the Dark* is really important to my philosophy of horror because, for me, disability and horror is sort of inextricably linked because of the fact that so much of the unexpected is inherent in the disability experience, so.

CHERYL: And you have a whole festival!

Access:Horror

ARIEL: My festival, Access:Horror, is rooted in the celebration of disability and genre: the fantastic, the horrific, the experimental. For me, it's all about the celebration of disability and the culture of disability rather than always thinking of disability as the Other. Because so often, in horror films, disability is a part of the parable. The moral of the story is that don't be like this, or you'll end up like this. It's so essential to me that we have a space where creators with disabilities can position their films about disability, where the horror can be ableism, or the horror can be the things that prevent you from being who you want to be in the world.

People do ask me why horror all the time, but they don't necessarily ask me where my passion for accessibility in horror comes from. So much of the time, the thing that drives me crazy is the fact that in the disability community, there is this general celebration of disability and filmmaking. But for the most part, people don't embrace genre filmmaking. It's still assumed that genre filmmaking is going to be largely ableist. Any disability representation is going to be poor representation. As a result, in disability spaces, you very rarely get accessibility and horror together. And in non-disabled spaces, you very rarely get accessibility and horror together. And so, that's why I created Access:Horror as a space where you could experience both things in one place.

When I went on my festival tour with *Our First Priority*, I found that it was only in spaces that had really great accessibility, like Superfest, that I felt anybody got my film really on any fundamental level. And it was so incredibly powerful to be in a space where everybody had this shared understanding, where there were collective breaths happening as an audience. And to experience that was one of the deepest pleasures of my life, and I wanted that for Access:Horror.

CHERYL: Yeah. And access is in the name of the festival. [chuckles] And it's fiction, right? People, I think, generally figure disability, in non-fiction, it might be the disabled character is something to fear or someone to fear, and then otherwise if you want any positive portrayal, it's documentary. [laughs]

ARIEL: Exactly. Exactly.

CHERYL: Yeah. So you have all kinds of fiction: scary, jump scary, experimental, weird, poetic, juicy, [laughs] literally squishy, juicy stuff.

ARIEL: I love I love the squishy and the juicy as do you.

CHERYL: Yeah. Yeah. It's very body. All of your films have captions and audio description.

ARIEL: Mm-hmm.

CHERYL: You only screen Access:Horror in physically accessible spaces. Any other access you prioritize?

ARIEL: Masks. We absolutely require masks for every screening. When we first went into the world, it was as an online-only festival in 2023, and in 2025, it was really important that we have accessible screenings for the most vulnerable in our population. Ergo, we had to have not-optional masks required for our screenings. When you go to any of the major festivals on the circuit, there's this understanding, "Oh yeah, I'm gonna catch something, and I'm just gonna be sick for two weeks afterward." That isn't the way it's supposed to be, and being sick for two weeks afterward could very well kill someone or leave them with long COVID. It feels so incredibly irresponsible to actually not commit to having a masked experience.

CHERYL: Well, yeah. Then your sick and your chronically ill and immunocompromised audience members aren't scared to come.

ARIEL: And so many of the people in our community have so many different reasons why you just can't interact unless masks are mandatory.

CHERYL: And you don't mean like a Freddy Krueger mask. You mean like—

ARIEL: I don't mean like a Freddy Krueger mask. I mean an actual, proper N95.

CHERYL: [laughs] Just double checking. Wouldn't that be great if you had a screening where like Freddy Krueger masks were required?

ARIEL: Oh, man.

When I first set up Access:Horror, my intent was for it to be a rotating thing. For it to start with Access:Horror and then become Access:Fantasy, Access:Comedy, Access whatever. Literally just Access colon insert genre here. And I wanted it to be a series of festivals that could, like, take over the world in every imaginable genre. Turns out that's a little hard to do when you're trying to just build one brand of something. And I don't feel like Access:Horror has actually finished its mission. So, I can't move on to the next thing until, you know, we've actually finished our mission. What I really want personally is for Access:Horror to be able to go international and to not only support international filmmakers with disabilities, but also, really to show people around the world different visions of horror and different visions of what is possible.

Ariel's current project

ARIEL: The project that I'm working on right now is specifically about disability and horror, specifically like my life as a child where I found myself in the face of Freddy Krueger as a young child. I was born with a very rare disease called PHACE syndrome that took my vision and my hearing on the right side and left me literally painfully disfigured on the right side. I was covered in red and purple from a capillary hemangioma that was just swollen to the point of pain on the right side of my face. But because I couldn't see the right side of my face, I literally never saw what it was that other people saw because I couldn't see out of my right eye. And my left eye just, when I looked in the mirror, just didn't really see the right side of my face at all. And so, when kids called me things like "monster" or "pizza face", I really didn't understand what they were talking about until age three.

[unnervingly tense, low music starts]

CHERYL NARRATING: Remember that bad babysitter with the weed and the boyfriend? Let's go back to that night when three-year-old Ariel watches *A Nightmare on Elm Street*.

ARIEL: Looking at Freddy, I saw what they must see. And I fell in love with Freddy. You know, that's not the story that we're led to expect. We're led to think, "Oh, well, how

terrible. How traumatizing to see yourself in this monster.” [unnerving music fades] But in reality, Freddy had agency. Freddy wasn’t expected to be perfect. Freddy wasn’t expected to be any of the things that I felt like I was expected to be. I fell in love with the fact that he had so much power and so much humor. To this day, I feel like Freddy saved my life as a kid because it helped me understand who I was and where I fit in.

CHERYL: So, you’re three years old, and you’re like, “Right, okay then. Me and Freddy.” Especially the way you set the story up—bad babysitter—somebody would expect the story to go, you were traumatized. And then you looked in the mirror, and you’re like, “Oh, no! I look like Freddy.” That was not your experience.

ARIEL: In my documentary, *Monstrous Me*, I also talk about other films that I was shown, including *Mask* and *Elephant Man*, which are, you know, very much inspirational stories of people with some form of facial difference who live and die being martyrs and being very well-behaved, and ultimately, teaching a lesson to the non-disabled people around them. I thoroughly rejected that idea. I didn’t know the words “inspiration porn” when I was a child, of course; however, I knew I didn’t want to be that. I knew I wanted to be a monster rather than a martyr.

CHERYL: So, have you achieved it? Are you a monster now?

ARIEL: I don’t think I’ve achieved peak monster yet. I think I have some work to do before I get there. But to me, like, being a monster is not necessarily about the absolute worst behavior in the world. It’s more about being willing to show something. This is my Latin roots coming out to, you know...

CHERYL: To haunt me? [laughs]

ARIEL: Yes, to haunt you. I was a Latin teacher for 15 years. The word “monster” actually comes from *demonstro*, *demonstrare*, the verb that means to point out or to show. And so, monsters are creatures that show you something. You know, going back to like the definitions of what horror is and what scary is, it’s the unseen, the hidden, the thing that doesn’t quite add up, that’s creating suspense for you. But then when the monster shows up, the monster is literally showing you things. It’s showing you the unseen, the hidden. My position in this world is almost like being a death doula in certain ways, but a doula for, you know, the unseen, the hidden, the things that need to be birthed into this world in a darker sense.

Getting back to something Alice Wong talked about, you know, in terms of death being the shadow partner, like, that idea that death and illness and disease, these things are partners with us in everything that we do. That doesn’t necessarily make them scary. They’re literally with us constantly.

CHERYL: I think you can see that in the post that Sandy Ho put up right after Alice Wong died. It was like, “Well, looks like I ran outta time.” I think she had been through the ringer so many times that it was like, I have to find the humor in this. She knew it would be sooner than later. And she had written that post, I’m sure, very carefully to highlight her humor and to remind people this is not scary. This is the...this is the deal. If

you're born, you'll die. That's the deal. You didn't make the deal, but here we are. And I felt like that kind of dry, droll humor, it didn't take the sad edge off, but it took the scary edge off. Like, we're all headed there. And if we're lucky, we'll see Alice Wong there at the end. And if we're even luckier, before we get there, we'll be haunted by her ghost in the meantime.

ARIEL: I look forward to that haunting in all the myriad ways. I've experienced it in a few, and I look forward to experiencing it in many, many more. Because Alice's ghost, honestly, like, from her final quote, "Don't let the bastards grind you down," I swear to God, I hear...I hear her voice in my head saying that [laughs] so frequently. I'm constantly reminded, you know, reading *Year of the Tiger*, about her words and her wishes for all of us. I don't want to, like, ever take for granted how much care and how much real love she had for the disability community. And her ghost is telling me things that are making me happy. I want to revel in this. It's very painful, still, remembering her death and grieving for her, but at the same time, like, I think of the Photoshop image that you created with RouRou, and I think [contented sigh] Alice's ghost lives on and will continue to live on.

Current film recommendations

CHERYL NARRATING: While you get cozy on the sofa next to Alice Wong's ghost, here are those recommendations from Ariel. You don't want to wait for the next installment of Access:Horror. Here's three films they've watched in January 2026.

ARIEL: The one that is the most outlandish and the most unrealistic, but at the same time joyful, is *Primate*, which involves a huge, huge component related to American Sign Language. It also stars the Deaf actor who was also an Oscar winner, Troy Kotsur. And he does great work in this and so does the chimp who rips people's faces off. I highly, highly recommend *Primate* for people who are looking for disability and horror. I also recommend, through the same lens, the film *The Plague* about a boys' water polo camp that is all about tween angst and bullying and is phenomenally realistic. And then I highly recommend Nia DaCosta's absolutely phenomenal *28 Years Later: The Bone Temple*. I cannot say enough good things about it. So, there you have it.

Wrap-up

[unnervingly tense music returns] CHERYL NARRATING: If you're online, go find Ariel and get connected...

ARIEL: On Instagram @JustAskABaska or @AccessHorror. I am also found at ArielBaska.com. [music fades]

GRANT: This is *Pigeonhole*.

Music in the episode

"Dopplerette" Kevin MacLeod (incompetech.com). Licensed under Creative Commons: By Attribution 4.0 License. <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

“Evening of Chaos“ Kevin MacLeod (incompetech.com). Licensed under Creative Commons: By Attribution 4.0 License. <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

“Static Motion” Kevin MacLeod (incompetech.com). Licensed under Creative Commons: By Attribution 4.0 License. <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.